

## FROM POLITICAL BIOGRAPHY TO POLITICAL EVENT THE DAENS MYTH IN LITERATURE IN CINEMA

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In 2017, Cinematek, the Royal Film Archive of Belgium, restored *Daens*, a 1992 biopic directed by Stijn Coninx about the Belgian priest and politician Adolf Daens (1839–1907). Cinematek's presentations of restored films are mostly cinephile events that are rather limited in scale and scope. The restored version of *Daens*, however, premiered in September 2017 at the popular Ostend Film Festival, after which it was screened on October 16, 2017, exactly twenty-five years after the film's original Belgian release, in ten multiplexes across Flanders, the northern, Dutch-speaking region of Belgium.<sup>1</sup> Both the restoration process and the rerelease of *Daens* attracted a great deal of press coverage, which says something about the lasting public appeal of the film, which was a huge success domestically at the time of its release and was the second Belgian film ever to be nominated for an Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. At the same time, public attention for the restored version of *Daens* illustrates the continuing fame of Adolf Daens.

*Daens* contributed to this fame, and so did the 1971 book on which the film was based: Louis Paul Boon's *Pieter Daens*. The book, a popular and critical success that earned its author several literary prizes (including the prestigious Triennial State Prize for Literature), was an important milestone in creating public awareness around the historical figure of Adolf Daens. As the title indicates, Boon's historical novel is narrated by Adolf Daens's lesser-known brother Pieter Daens. Pieter Daens's first-person narration actually focuses on Adolf Daens and presents him as the real hero of the story, turning the book into a literary biography for both Pieter and Adolf Daens.

In his own time, Adolf's brother Pieter Daens had contributed considerably to the charismatic appeal of Adolf Daens via his writings in his own popular newspapers and by publishing a hagiographic biography in 1909, two years after Adolf's death. There thus exists a long tradition of media feeding

the “Daens myth,”<sup>2</sup> in which Adolf Daens is idealized as a self-assured hero fighting social injustice. Due to their popularity and critical significance, Boon’s book *Pieter Daens* and Coninx’s film *Daens* are the most important highlights within this tradition of media narrations of Adolf Daens’s life.

This article examines how these literary and cinematic political biographies are related to the Daens myth. After briefly providing the necessary background on Adolf Daens as a historical persona, the article discusses Boon’s literary strategies, including how the conflict between his claim of objectivity and his choice of presenting Pieter Daens as an I-narrator have contributed to the Daens myth. Next, the article focuses on the film adaptation of Boon’s book. After examining the film’s long production process and the struggles in acquiring government funding, the article discusses the film’s heroization of Adolf Daens. It analyzes how *Daens* can be interpreted as being in tune with Flemish nationalism and how the film has effectively been deployed in a political Flemish nation-building discourse. As such, the article shows how the political biopic became a political event itself.

#### ADOLF DAENS AND HIS TIME

During the second half of the nineteenth century, an important social issue gained prominence in Belgian society and politics. The difficult circumstances of the working class, suffering from the industrial revolution and agricultural crises, gave rise to the socialist movement. Alongside the establishment of socialist organizations and political parties, there was also a growing social awareness in certain liberal and Catholic circles. The rise of socialist ideas led to the extension of the Belgian voting system from census suffrage to universal plural suffrage in 1893 (Verdoodt, *De Zaak* 15). That same year, after a failed ecclesiastical career, the then-fifty-four-year-old priest Adolf Daens started his political activities at the industrial town of Aalst.

After having been a brilliant student at the Jesuit college in his hometown, Aalst, he entered the Jesuit Order of Drongen in 1859. Having been a teacher at various colleges, he studied philosophy and theology in Leuven. In 1871, however, he resigned from the Jesuit order after difficulties with his superiors. He tried to return to the order in the same year and again the following year, but was not accepted. He then attended seminary in Ghent and became a priest in 1873, after which his career was characterized by various difficulties and vicissitudes. He served as a teacher or (assistant) priest at several places, but due to his idiosyncratic character and his critical attitude, he often encountered difficulties with his clerical environment. At the same time, he was denied various ecclesiastical offices he had aspired to. In 1888, Adolf Daens returned to Aalst as a priest without an office. He moved in with his younger brother, the journalist and publisher Pieter Daens.

His brother introduced Adolf Daens to the Christene Volkspartij, the first Christian Democratic political party in Belgium, which determined that the Catholic Party was not concerned enough with social issues. Adolf Daens, driven by social and critical engagement as well as by resentment about his failed ecclesiastical career, wrote the party program and soon became the party's key figure. From 1894 until 1898 and from 1902 until 1906, he was elected as a member of the Belgian parliament. His first concern was to improve the miserable circumstances of working people by reducing unemployment and fighting wage reductions, child labor, long working hours, dangerous working conditions, and poor living conditions (Verdoodt, "Daens").

In Aalst, Daens was opposed by Charles Woeste, an important conservative politician within the Catholic Party who resisted social reforms. Furthermore, Daens met great opposition from the church, whose leaders wanted to keep the political Catholic bloc together. The bishop of Ghent consequently wanted Daens to withdraw from politics and tried to isolate him by taking various measures, such as suspending him and forbidding him to read Mass publicly. Other authorities also opposed Daens, such as the Vatican and the Belgian King Leopold II. This opposition, together with Daens's failing health, made him a mere shadow of the militant parliament member he once was. A few months before his death in 1907, Daens reconciled with the church, which led the Christian People's Party to exclude him as a member.

The historical significance of Daens is primarily related to the fact that he was an embodiment of the first profound rupture in the Belgian Catholic community and to the Daensist movement to which he gave his name. This radical Christian Democratic movement, which had an important regional meaning in Flanders until the Second World War, combined social progressiveness with Flemish emancipation ideals. As such, the Daensist movement was part of the Flemish movement, which in that time transformed from a language movement into a national movement (De Wever, "From Language to Nationality"). While Adolf Daens attached importance to the Dutch language issue (at that time in Belgium, Dutch was still considered inferior to French), he was less a supporter of the Flemish movement than the other leaders of the Daensist movement were (Verdoodt, "Daens" 844).

#### LOUIS PAUL BOON'S *PIETER DAENS*

Interest in the life of Adolf Daens and the history of the Daensist movement grew in the 1960s, during which several historiographical studies devoted to retracing the Catholic priest's political career were published. The 1971 publication of Louis Paul Boon's *Pieter Daens* was a major breakthrough in the public attention to Daens.<sup>3</sup> In an earlier phase, the book's title was *Fabriekstad*

*Aalst* and aimed to show “how in the nineteenth century the workers of Aalst fought against poverty and injustice”—as the subtitle of the book read.<sup>4</sup> By changing the title to *Pieter Daens*, Boon foregrounded the biographical character of the book.

*Pieter Daens* is not just a novelization of a real person’s life and historical events; it is a nonfiction novel (also sometimes called “documentary fiction” or “literary nonfiction”) and was labeled a “documentary novel” (*docu-roman* in Dutch) when released. Hans Renders and Binne de Haan argue that the literary form often decreases the biographical value of a text, as it is “all too often used as camouflage, as an excuse for not doing any serious research. For that reason, many authors of nonfiction texts love to display the label ‘literary’” (3). This critique, however, does not apply to Boon, whose book is based on extensive research. As he informs the reader in the preface, *Pieter Daens*

is de vrucht en de last van een vijf jaar lang doorploegen van dag- en weekbladen, gaande van de jaren 1865 tot en met 1918, en van vele archieven en boeken, op het onderwerp—de sociale en politieke strijd in het fabriekstadje Aalst—betrekking hebbend. Alles bij elkaar werden het zestienhonderd dichtbeschreven vellen, met feiten en jaartallen die geen mens konden interesseren. (Boon 7)

[is the fruit and the burden of five years of plowing through daily and weekly newspapers from 1865 up to 1918 and many archives and books on the subject—the social and political struggle in the industrial town of Aalst. Altogether, this resulted in sixteen hundred tightly written sheets, with facts and dates that couldn’t interest anyone.]

Subsequently, Boon enumerates the most important sources that he used for his book (a full list of consulted archives and publications is also included at the end), and he apologizes for “soms letterlijk en haast schaamteloos overnemen” [sometimes literally and almost shamelessly borrowing] from these sources (7). He emphasizes that “geen enkel woord fantasie in het hele boek te vinden is. Al het beschrevene is naakte nare werkelijkheid geweest, nog niet zo heel lang geleden” [no word of fantasy can be found throughout the book. All that’s described has been the naked and nasty reality, not so long ago] (7–8). It may be clear that Boon does not belong to Renders and de Haan’s category of literary nonfiction writers who present an imagined reality. On the contrary, it was Boon’s explicit intention to describe the historical events and persons “zo objectief mogelijk” [as objectively as possible] (8). Boon thus belongs to the category of “the biographer” who “presents himself as someone who describes and interprets an actual life” (Renders and de Haan 3). This presentation does not mean, however, that Boon’s aim was to deliver a

biographical study based on scholarly methods to better understand the historical significance of Adolf Daens. His first concern was to write a compelling book, thereby illuminating Daens's role in the struggle against social injustice. One of the main literary strategies he devised was to write in the first person, thereby offering the narrator, and through him the reader, a direct experience of the events. Boon aimed to increase the reader's emotional involvement and enhance feelings of indignation about the injustice portrayed in the book.

Boon argues that he would rather adopt Pieter Daens's viewpoint because he could identify with him best as a journalist: "Deze Pieter Daens werd als centrale figuur genomen omdat hij, zowel als dagbladschrijver en man met nimmer verflauwende liefde voor de kleine man, als mens met gevoel voor humor en met tevens inzicht van al het bereikkelijke in deze Wereld, best door mij te benaderen en te begrijpen viel" [Pieter Daens was taken as the central figure because he, as a journalist and as a man with a never-fading love for the common man, as a person with a sense of humor and with an understanding of all that is relative in this world, could be best approached and understood by me] (7).<sup>5</sup> Boon further explains in the book's preface that "Uit zijn bladen en uit allerlei boeken over hem en zijn broer pastor Adolf Daens, werd zoveel mogelijk door hemzelf geschreven tekst gelicht, dit om zijn aard en wezen zo zuiver als maar mogelijk te benaderen" [From his publications and from all sorts of books about him and his brother, pastor Adolf Daens, as much as possible text written by himself was used, to approach his nature and being as purely as possible] (7). Although Boon repeatedly contends in interviews that he thinks he has succeeded in showing what Pieter Daens felt and thought (Durnez 15), choosing a historical figure as the I-narrator inevitably makes the book a work of fiction. Indeed, Boon's stylistic choice has far-reaching consequences. As the historian and Daens expert Frans-Jos Verdoodt rightly observes, the use of the first-person narration may be artistically successful, but it also implies "een mystificatie, die Boon in de praktijk ontslaat van een eigen historisch-kritische benadering" [a mystification, which in practice excludes Boon from a critical-historical approach] ("Hoe Louis" 83). Verdoodt also notes that Boon had no knowledge of many important historical facts when he wrote his book between 1964 and 1971: evidence of the Vatican's role in Adolf Daens's political activities only emerged in scholarly studies after 1979 ("Hoe Louis" 82). Verdoodt further criticizes Boon's focus on the rise of socialism in the industrial town of Aalst, which led the writer to disregard some aspects of the Daens case—notably those situated outside Aalst or outside the factories ("Hoe Louis" 83).

The most pertinent critique concerns Boon's obvious bias toward his subject. Despite his claim to pursue objectivity, Boon's sympathy for the Daens brothers and for their social ideas and struggle is evident throughout the book. This sympathy often results in hagiographic tendencies, particularly in the representation of Adolf Daens. Boon never made a secret of his adoration for Adolf Daens, emphasizing that he had "de grootste eerbied voor hem. Hij was een zeer grote meneer, een van de grootste die wij in Vlaanderen hebben gehad" [the greatest respect for him. He was a very great man, one of the greatest we have had in Flanders] (Durnez 15). Adopting the perspective of Pieter Daens, who clearly looks up to his older brother, Boon describes Adolf Daens as a kind of genius, or, as Christine Levecq puts it, as a "lopende monument" [walking monument] (25).

From a scholarly point of view, Boon's sympathy toward his subject undermines the historical value of the book (Renders and de Haan 7), even though *Pieter Daens* is not, and was never intended to be, an academic work. By adding a preface in which he reflects about the book's sources, Boon however bolsters the text's claim to be historically informed and accurate. In fact, Boon's self-proclaimed objectivity serves the Daens myth, as Adolf Daens's heroic appearance is presented as the historical truth.

### GENESIS OF *DAENS*

After the publication and success of Boon's book in 1971, the historiographic and popular attention for Adolf Daens boomed, leading to, for example, the founding of a fund titled the Priester Daensfonds in 1976 and the museum and archive dedicated to the Flemish social struggle called the Daensmuseum en Archief voor de Vlaamse Sociale Strijd in 1978. In the wake of this Daens revival, filmmaker Robbe De Hert started working on a film adaptation of Boon's *Pieter Daens*. De Hert had just scored the biggest popular hit of his career with *De Witte van Sichem*, a 1980 adaptation of Ernest Claes's classic novel *De Witte*, which was originally published in 1920 and is situated in the Flemish countryside of 1901. Following this success, De Hert wanted to undertake a new historical film based on a famous literary work and chose to adapt an author of his own choice: Louis Paul Boon (1912–1979). By adapting *Pieter Daens*, De Hert paid homage to his friend and collaborator Boon,<sup>6</sup> while the social subject also suited the director's own social engagement. In the early 1980s, De Hert and screenwriter Fernand Auwera prepared a screenplay and decided to modify the story's perspective from Pieter Daens to his brother, Adolf Daens, consequently changing the title to *Priester Daens*, which would later be shortened to *Daens*.

Making an expensive historical film like *Daens* in Flanders almost automatically requires an application for public subsidies. Due to the small domestic market, which makes it extremely difficult to produce a profitable film, government support is in most cases of vital importance. Indeed, since the establishment of a Flemish film support system in 1964, more than three-quarters of all Flemish feature films have received substantial public subsidies. This means that Flemish film policy has considerable power over the films that are produced in Flanders (Willems, "The Role" 94). For *Daens*, which was a Flemish production in coproduction with the French Community of Belgium, the Netherlands, and France, 25 percent of the film's total budget (140,500,000 Belgian francs, more or less 4 million dollars at the time) was provided by the Flemish government. This public support implied the evaluation of the film project by a politically appointed film commission that advised the minister of culture in his film support decisions.

*Daens* had a long and eventful application process. Between 1981 and 1992, the Selection Commission for Cultural Films (SCF) discussed the project at no less than nineteen meetings. From the start, the SCF showed sympathy for the project. In 1982, the commission claimed to be "uitermate geïnteresseerd blijft aan een mogelijke realisatie van 'Priester Daens', op basis van de sociale, politieke en culturele betekenis, die in een dergelijk project kan vervat liggen" [extremely interested in a possible realization of *Priest Daens* on the basis of the social, political, and cultural significance that can be found in such a project] (SCF 17 Sept. 1982). Consequently, the project was awarded a screenplay grant, thereby signaling the power of Flemish nation-building in Flemish film policy as it stemmed from the commission's general willingness to support films dealing with Flemish history. The commission affirmed the "Flemish character" of these films and was keen to provide Flemish audiences with important episodes in the history of Flanders (Willems, *Subsidie* 202).

However, obtaining production support proved to be a lot more difficult. In part, these difficulties can be traced to the same commitment of the film commission that had advanced the allocation of a screenplay grant. As the SCF wanted to introduce Flemish audiences to Flanders' "true" history, several members emphasized the importance of historical accuracy, and criticized projects that misrepresented important historical facts or went against the spirit of history. Conversely, the commission expressed its appreciation for projects that met the historical accuracy expectations. Accordingly, the commission attached a great deal of importance to in-depth historical research before the shooting of a film could start. This was also the case for *Daens*; the first discussion of the project in 1981 emphasized the "noodzakelijke historische research, die voor een dergelijk onderwerp vereist is" [indispensable



historical research required for such a subject] (SCF 20 Nov. 1981).<sup>7</sup> An important stumbling block was the use of the term “universal suffrage” instead of “universal plural suffrage” in the screenplay. The commission was afraid that the term “universal suffrage” would be interpreted as “universal single suffrage,” which was not introduced in Belgium until after the First World War. When the filmmakers made statements in the press that historical veracity would not be their first concern, they were reminded that the commission had always “veel belang hechtte aan de juiste historische context van het verhaal. Ze dringt er bijgevolg op aan dat het ‘algemeen meervoudig stemrecht’ op een historisch adequate manier in de film zou voorkomen” [attached great importance to a correct representation of the historical context of the story. Therefore, the commission insists that the “universal plural suffrage” should be represented in a historically adequate manner] (SCF 25 Sept. 1991).

The commission appeared to have no problem with other historical deviations, such as the heroization of Adolf Daens. Considering the general Flemish ideological concerns of the film commission, focus on the universal suffrage issue might be explained by the importance of the changes in the electoral system for the development of the Flemish movement. The extensions of the voting right system (from census to lower census to universal plural to universal single suffrage) caused the Dutch-speaking population to weigh more heavily in elections, which indirectly led to the political growth of the Flemish movement. The correct representation of the voting right system was thus connected to the correct representation of the Flemish movement’s history. Notwithstanding the commission’s sensitivity to this issue, in the final film, people continued to talk about “universal suffrage,” which in its turn illustrates the limitations of the film commission’s direct impact on the text.

Next to the historical accuracy issue, other factors also hindered the funding process. The film commission was very sensitive to the administrative negligence of Robbe De Hert and his film collective, Fugitive Cinema.<sup>8</sup> Because of the scale of the *Daens* project and the lack of sufficient guarantees, the commission found it difficult to place trust in Fugitive Cinema as a production company. De Hert took offense to this distrust and in his memoirs accused the commission of “onbegrip, verwaandheid, bekrompenheid en incompetentie” [incomprehension, arrogance, narrow-mindedness, and incompetence] (59). Furthermore, he also saw an ideological reason for the refusal of production support: Walter Goetmaeckers, a commission member with a socialist background, would have fundamentally disagreed with De Hert’s making a film about a priest, contesting his abilities to sympathize with a priest as a communist himself (De Hert 63–65; Everaerts 71).



Whatever the case may be, when a few years later the project was resubmitted to the film commission, this time without Goetmaeckers and with a few new commission members, the support process was much smoother. Some of the earlier production-related objections no longer applied because the production company was changed from Fugitive Cinema to Dirk Impens's Favourite Films, with whom De Hert had just made *Blueberry Hill* in 1989. The commission also explicitly approved the appointment of Robbe De Hert as director, but after almost a decade of struggling to find the necessary funds his enthusiasm for the project had waned. Impens subsequently attracted director Stijn Coninx, who had just scored the biggest Belgian cinema hit ever at that time, the popular comedy *Koko Flanel*, released in 1989.

The actual production of *Daens* could now finally take off. However, for a Flemish film, the unusually large production scale—including shooting periods in Poland (where they found factories that resembled Aalst's factories at the end of the nineteenth century) and Italy (for the scenes set in the Vatican)—created quite a few problems. These challenges prompted the filmmakers to request an additional grant of 10 million Belgian Francs on top of the 25 million they had already obtained for production support. The commission confirmed its confidence in “de culturele waarde van een project dat zij met enthousiasme op gang heeft geholpen en is van oordeel dat de film, hoe en door wie dan ook, een optimale afwerking verdient” [the cultural value of a project that it has enthusiastically supported, and is of the opinion that the film, no matter how and by whom, deserves an optimal finish] (SCF 20 Feb. 1992). The Christian Democratic Minister of Culture, Hugo Weckx, was even more convinced of *Daens*'s value and decided to grant the requested amount without awaiting the (officially necessary) commission's definitive recommendation.

### THE HEROIZATION OF ADOLF DAENS

While Boon's historical novel provides a brief note on his sources and an explanation of its historical intentions in the preface, the film reveals almost nothing about the research on which Boon's book is based. Reading between the lines, however, the film does make some claims about its historical intentions. For example, *Daens* largely makes use of real names, thereby contributing to the historical-realistic aura of the film, and suggesting that the film tells the official, true story of a person's life (Custen 8). This effect is strengthened by using the real name of the historical figure in the title. Importantly, after the film's last scene, the following text can be read: “Adolf Daens overleed in 1907, na een tweede ambtstermijn als volksvertegenwoordiger” [Adolf Daens died in 1907, after a second mandate as member of parliament]. This

is an often-employed strategy by historical films, not only to underscore that the film was based on a true story (which is also often made clear by the film's marketing and press coverage, certainly in the case of *Daens*), but also to grant the film a certain historical credibility. Furthermore, the end credits indicate the cooperation of two historical consultants, which suggests the filmmakers paid considerable attention to the historical accuracy of the film.<sup>9</sup>

Several historians have indeed praised some of the film's historical facets, particularly its depiction of the workers' miserable material and spiritual circumstances (see Butstraen; Levecq; and Verdoodt, "Filmologie"). Nevertheless, as the filmmakers repeatedly stressed in interviews, the film does not present itself as documentary fiction as did the book. Whereas Boon emphasized that all characters and events in his book were based on real-life persons and events, the film also presents various fictional characters and events. The most prominent added element concerns a sort of Romeo-and-Juliet motif, embodied by the fictional characters of Nette Scholliers (played by Antje De Boeck) and Jan De Meeter (played by Michaël Pas).<sup>10</sup> While the Daensist Nette comes from a big, poor Catholic worker's family, Jan is a socialist news vendor who is chased by a gang of Catholic conservative thugs, led by Nette's brother. While the addition of these fictional characters introduces a love story, it also serves *Daens's* biographical narrative. As Nette and Jan's love overcomes many hindrances, it symbolizes the historical rapprochement between the Daensist movement and socialists as well as Adolf Daens's ideal of cooperation beyond ideological barriers to improve the lives and working conditions of the common people.

This fictional element is an example of how the filmmakers did not limit themselves to historical facts but still wanted to make a film whose general messages are historically "correct." As such, the film is in accordance with the so-called modern historians' view of historical films, promoted by scholars such as Robert Rosenstone, Pierre Sorlin, and Hayden White. This vision acknowledges that films have particular dramatic conventions and medium-specific characteristics and limitations. To ensure that a mainstream historical film succeeds, it is almost always necessary to make historical deviations and introduce fictive elements. Well-known techniques in film dramas—such as the merging of different historical persons or groups into one character or a simplified narrative presentation of historical events, which can also be seen in *Daens*—do not necessarily devalue the film from a historical point of view. More important than a literal rendering of the historical facts is the question of whether a film's representations have broader historical relevance. Seen from this perspective, *Daens* indeed has great historical relevance, including in many of its fictional inventions (see De Wever and Vande Winkel 207; Levecq 26). Verdoodt even argues that, compared with Boon's book, the film

is in many ways more historically accurate because it takes advantage of the various new facts and insights that scholarly studies had provided since the publication of *Pieter Daens* ("Hoe Louis" 82).

At the same time, the film can also be criticized from the modern historians' perspective on historical films. *Daens* simplifies social issues and the rise of the Christian Democratic movement in Flanders as the film does not shed light on the crisis of farmers and the cottage industries, nor on the malaise of the middle class, which also resulted from the power of the clergy and the dominance of the French language in public life (Verdoodt, "Filmologie" 120–21). Importantly for the biographical construction, the film does not show how people other than Adolf Daens started the movement of which Daens became a symbol, nor does it hint at the antimilitaristic and anticolonial sentiments of this movement. By omitting these important historical elements, the film indeed gives a distorted representation of history and of Daens's life.

The film's contribution to mythologizing Daens is particularly relevant here. On a broader political-historical level, the film contributed to the "Daens myth," described by Verdoodt ("Hoe Louis" 78) as the consecration of Daens's Aalst as the turning point and the epicenter of the Christian social revolution that took place in Flanders, parallel to and influenced by the socialist labor movement. On the level of political biography, the film contributed greatly to another "Daens myth," the one concerning Adolf Daens's heroic persona. These two critiques also apply to Boon's book, but the idealization of Adolf Daens is especially enlarged in the film.

Apart from one scene, in which we see Daens alone and embittered in the waiting room of the Vatican, waiting in vain for an audience with the pope, Daens is represented as a dynamic, self-assured hero, whereas in real life, he was a man with many doubts. The casting of Jan Decleir, a well-known and charismatic Belgian actor with an impressive physical appearance, for the role of Daens certainly helped in this respect. Still, the heroization first stems from the film's narrative. For example, it is meaningful that the film does not show Daens's final years, when he was of less political significance and ultimately fell sick and submitted to the Church. Instead, the film ends with a last heroic deed: when an assistant priest refuses to bury a child because he considers him a "thief" (he died while stealing food from circus animals), Daens, who has just been suspended from his religious activities by his clerical superiors, takes off his sacerdotal vestments and throws them to the assistant priest. After this act of resistance to the Church, he buries the child, supported by a large group of working-class people.

Another narrative strategy serving such heroization is the individualization of Adolf Daens. On this point, the film differs greatly not only from historical reality but also from Boon's book, which gave an important role to Adolf's brother Pieter, as the book was written from his perspective, as well as to various other people linked to the Daensist movement. In the film, Adolf Daens is making important political and social decisions on his own much more. Furthermore, his historical importance is exaggerated by wrongly attributing important historical accomplishments to him. As a result, his achievements and personality are even more glorified. The film insinuates, for example, that Adolf Daens established the Christian People's Party, as he is portrayed writing a party program in the printing office of his brother, who is surprised when he reads the name of the party. Adolf Daens indeed wrote the party program, but the Christian's People's Party was established before Pieter Daens asked his brother to join them.

Director Stijn Coninx had no problem admitting that his film represented Daens as much more of a hero than he was: "Dat is ook zo, maar ik beschouw dat niet als kritiek. Er is nu eenmaal een verschil tussen fictie en documentaire. In een fictiefilm is het noodzakelijk om personages zo interessant mogelijk te maken, anders komt de boodschap niet over" [That is true, but I do not consider that a criticism. There is a difference between fiction and documentary. In a fictional film, it is necessary to make characters as interesting as possible, otherwise the message does not come across] (Depaepe 36). Coninx's first concern was to make a film for a broad audience, which is also clear from the many mainstream film conventions he applied. Indeed, strategies of individualization and heroization are narrative conventions of the historical film and the biopic genre (Custen 72; Stubbs 69). *Daens* follows the typical central narrative of the biopic, focusing on a person (an underdog) who aims to achieve something, and experiences a lot of opposition from the establishment, but through perseverance succeeds in the end and thus deserves the title of hero. *Daens* follows these and various other biopic and mainstream film conventions faithfully, which from a modern historian's view to some extent legitimizes the historical distortions. Nevertheless, the film loses historical relevance as a political biography because Daens's heroization better serves a contemporary political discourse than a historical one.

One might object to Nicolas Thys's statement that "*Daens* is not really an ideological film" considering that *Daens* echoes contemporary Flemish concerns about regional autonomy. In 1993, Belgium officially became a federal state and granted a large degree of political autonomy to the different regions and communities. To consolidate and broaden public support for the newly born Flemish substate, Flanders needed a modern mythology with heroes

who might replace the outdated medieval mystique.<sup>11</sup> From this perspective, Daens matched very well the political developments toward a federal Belgium and a more independent Flanders (see also Reynebeau, “Pieter” 12). The film shows that Adolf Daens along with the Flemish people fought poverty and injustice. Moreover, the most important opponents in the represented struggle were mainly French-speaking politicians and industrialists,<sup>12</sup> which corresponds with the contemporary political “othering” of the Belgian francophone community, who could no longer exercise power over the new Flemish substate. In this context, Adolf Daens embodied a courageous protagonist sacrificing himself for the empowerment of the Flemish people, which reinforces the film’s potential to serve the cause of Flemish nation-building. This Flemish nationalist element is confirmed by the fact that the film portrays Daens as a more enthusiastic supporter of the Flemish movement than he really was.

#### **DAENS AND FLEMISH NATION-BUILDING**

When *Daens* premiered at the Venice Film Festival in September 1992, the Italian representative of the International Catholic Organisation for Cinema objected to awarding the film an honorable mention and argued that the Vatican’s actions were misrepresented. Several Belgian historians quickly countered this critique, which gave an aura of historical truthfulness to the film. At the same time, this anecdote generated extra attention for the film and served as the starting point for its successful career, which culminated in an Oscar nomination for Best Foreign Language Film in 1993.<sup>13</sup>

Domestically, the film was met with mainly positive reviews and attracted 848,000 cinemagoers, thereby becoming the third most popular Belgian film ever at the time. In Flanders, the hype around the film and consequently around Adolf Daens contributed in 2005 to Daens’s fifth place in the popular voting contest “The Greatest Belgian,” conducted by a cooperation of major Flemish media players. The Daens hype was soon translated into official accolades, including a screening of *Daens* at the Flemish parliament and many other gala screenings that were attended by the Flemish elites. The film’s director, Stijn Coninx, was even made a baron by King Baudouin of the Belgians. In addition to honoring the director, this official recognition for Adolf Daens was also an implicit apology, since Daens had been opposed by King Baudouin’s predecessor, King Leopold II, and various other nobles. Even today, *Daens*’s prestige is still growing; the film is often used as a reference point in popular writings about Flemish and Belgian cinema, and, as mentioned at the beginning of this article, was recently restored and rereleased by Cinematek.

The cinematic political biography *Daens* and the film's subject, Adolf Daens, have been explicitly used for contemporary political purposes. This political appropriation of *Daens* was most explicit in the appointment of the film as a "Cultural Ambassador of Flanders" by the Flemish Government in 1992. The aim of the ambassadorship was to improve the positive brand awareness of "Flanders," thereby contributing to the political-ideological project of Flemish nation-building (Report of the CEEE). In this respect, it is important to note that *Daens*, as a film about the origins of Christian democracy—while also being sympathetic to the rise of socialism and the Flemish movement—reflected the Flemish government coalition at the time, which consisted of the Christian Democratic party Christelijke Volkspartij, the socialist party Socialistische Partij and the Flemish nationalist party Volksunie.<sup>14</sup>

The Christian Democratic Minister of Culture, Hugo Weckx, who had already shown his appreciation by granting extra subsidies to the film, was particularly keen to use *Daens* in his political speeches. The minister, who regularly emphasized the importance of the "ownness," or the "Flemish identity" of *Daens*, was not a big supporter of the growing internationalization that had characterized the Flemish film production sector since the 1980s. Although Weckx regretted that this mode of production too often led to a loss of a film's national identity, the success of *Daens* proved that it was possible for a film to combine an international coproduction strategy to facilitate a bigger budget (since Flemish funds are insufficient to make a film with such high production costs) with an "authentic Flemish story" drawing from Flemish history and literature. As a result, Weckx used *Daens* as an example for the Flemish film industry, and the minister's call was answered in the following years by the production of two historical biopics: *Gaston's War*, released in 1997, deals with a Flemish resistance fighter during the Second World War, whereas *Molokai*, released in 1999, focuses on the world-famous priest Father Damien's service to leprosy patients in Hawai'i. Like *Daens*, these films presented a Flemish history of "great men" in which the rebellious, heroic, and idiosyncratic characteristics of historical figures are magnified. As such, *Daens's* contribution to Flemish nation-building is not only found in the film's textual and contextual political discourses but also in its impact on Flemish film history.

## NOTES

1. This cinema release was a cooperation between Cinematek and the Belgian cinema chain Kinepolis Group, one of the biggest players in the European cinema market.
2. Apart from the many publications, exhibitions, and events contributing to the heroic image of Daens throughout the years, there has also been a theater adaptation of Boon's book in 1979 by the theater company Nederlands Toneel Gent and a popular musical adaptation of Coninx's film in 2008 by entertainment company Studio 100.
3. Louis Paul Boon (1912–1979) was, together with Hugo Claus, arguably the most important Flemish writer from the second half of the twentieth century.
4. The full original title of this book is *Pieter Daens of hoe in de negentiende eeuw de arbeiders van Aalst vochten tegen armoede en onrecht*. All the translations from Dutch to English are my own.
5. With *Pieter Daens*, Boon can thus be positioned in a long row of journalists acting as political biographers, a tradition that goes back until the nineteenth century (Renders).
6. Boon acted in two of De Hert's short films and coauthored the screenplay of *De Witte van Siche*.
7. Ten years later, the same remarks were still made. See the SCF meeting minutes for July 10, 1991.
8. When De Hert submitted his *Daens* project in 1981, he still had to finish three projects for which he had already received government support.
9. The historical consultants were Daens expert Frans-Jos Verdoodt and Aalst's city archivist and president of the Louis Paul Boon Society Karel Baert.
10. Jan De Meeter is the name of a historical figure who was involved in the social and political history of Aalst at the end of the nineteenth century (he is also described in Boon's book), but apart from being a socialist, he bears no historical resemblance to the film character called Jan De Meeter, which makes this name choice somewhat strange, certainly in the light of the filmmakers' historical concerns.
11. This was proven, for example, by the failed 1984 film adaptation of Hendrik Conscience's 1838 national epic set in 1302, *The Lion of Flanders* by Hugo Claus (Willems, "Conscience's").
12. See Sanaker for an analysis of how French and Dutch language in *Daens* is used in a symbolic way to augment the represented conflict.
13. At the same time, the international success of *Daens* should not be exaggerated. In the coproducing country of France, for example, *Daens* was only released in 1994 (after the similarly themed French 1993 film *Germinal* by Claude Berri), where it received negative reviews and proved to be a box office disaster.
14. It is also in this context that director Harry Kümel calls *Daens* a "regime film" (Mathijs xvii).



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